

Remembering Ernesto Cardenal: Selections from His Archive (Exhibition)



Description

On March 1, 2020, prominent Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal passed away, leaving an indelible legacy behind. He was a multi-faceted man: He was a poet, priest, revolutionary, liberation theologian, sculptor, and activist. This exhibition seeks to trace and reflect on key moments in his life.

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Introduction



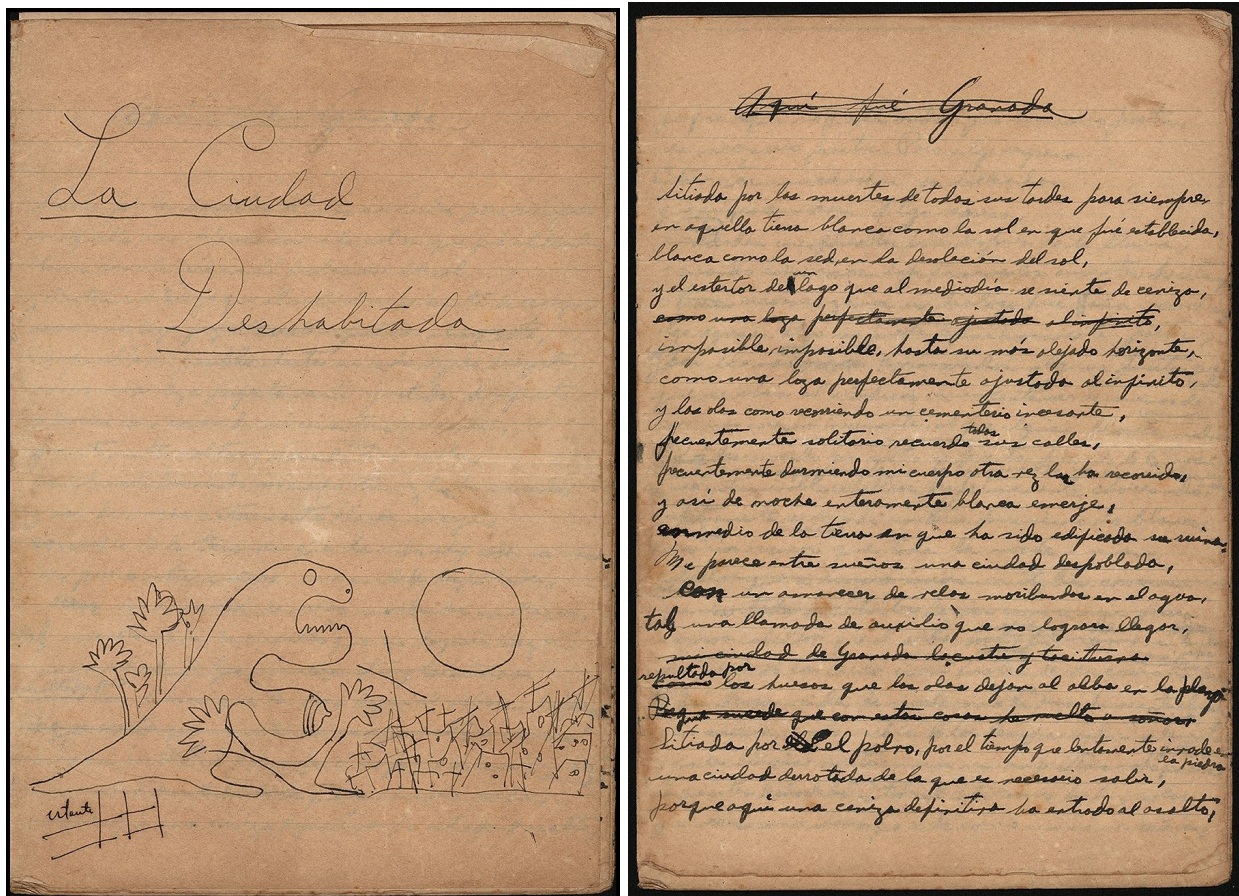
On March 1, 2020, prominent Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal passed away, leaving an indelible legacy behind. He was a multi-faceted man: He was a poet, priest, revolutionary, liberation theologian, sculptor, and activist. This exhibition seeks to trace and reflect on key moments in his life.

The selections exhibited here are from the [Ernesto Cardenal Papers](#), which were acquired by the Benson Latin American Collection in 2016. UT Austin was fortunate enough to have Ernesto Cardenal visit in November of that year to mark the opening of his archive, delivering a memorable poetry reading in front of hundreds gathered.

Please enjoy this exhibition in both English and Spanish as we remember the life and impact of Ernesto Cardenal.

Early Years

Ernesto Cardenal was born in Granada, Nicaragua, in 1925. His childhood years were marked by an ever-growing interest in literature and writing, which continued through his studies of literature and humanities as a teenager in Managua. From 1942 to 1947, he earned his Master of Letters degree from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). In 1948, he was admitted to Columbia University in New York City, where he entered a master's program in North American literature.



"La ciudad deshabitada." One of Cardenal's first published poems, written while he was a student at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), 1946.

T21/48

Columbia University
in the City of New York

[NEW YORK 27, N. Y.]
OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS
321-322 UNIVERSITY HALL

August 11, 1948

Mr. Ernesto Cardenal
601 West 11th Street
Apt. 12-J
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Cardenal:

We are pleased to certify that you have been admitted to Columbia University to begin your studies on **September 17th, 1948** subject only to the following conditions:

1. That you take the University English examination and make up on a non-credit basis any deficiencies found in your English preparation.
2. That you observe the regulations of the Immigration Service and carry a full day-time program of not less than twelve points.
3. That you are being admitted as an unclassified student in our Graduate Department of English and that your classification as a degree candidate will depend upon your performance here.

You will receive your Registration Permit after you have filled out and returned to us the blue application form which was given to you by Mr. Hurd.

Your appearance at the University will constitute acceptance of the above mentioned conditions. This letter, certifying to your admission, is sent **for your use.**

Please let me know if we can assist you in any other way.

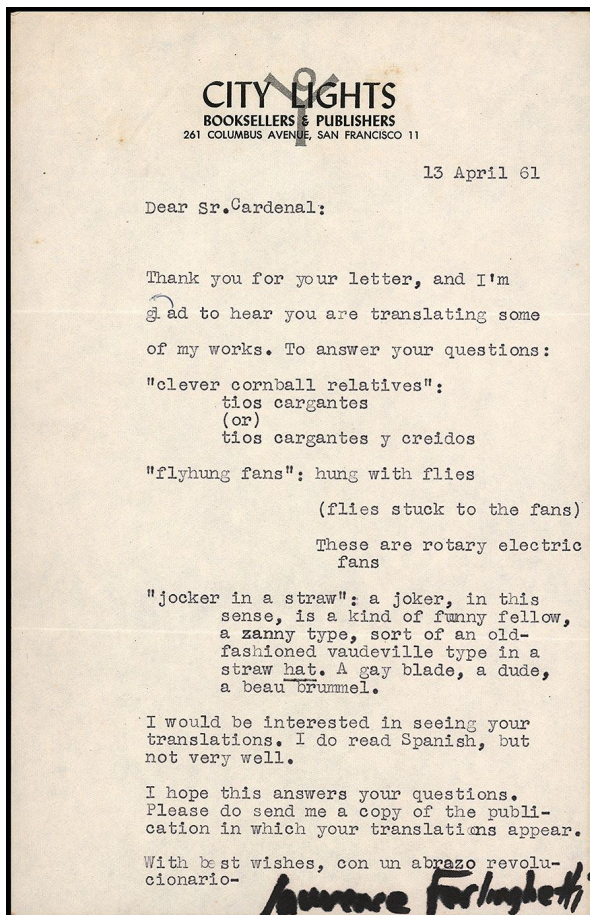
Very truly yours,
Matthew F. Norton
Matthew F. Norton
Assistant to the Director
Foreign Student Desk

MFN/aa
Enc. T-23

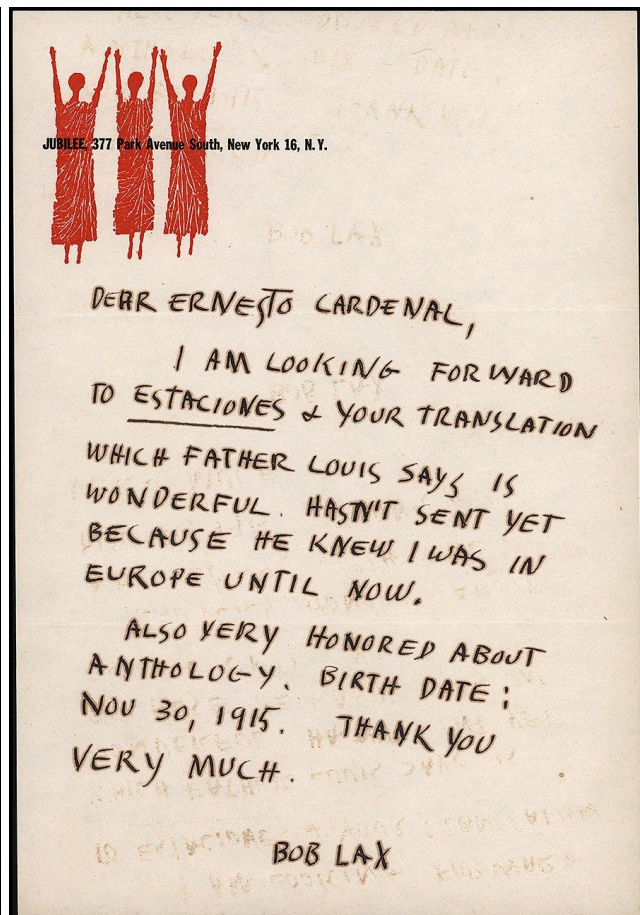
Letter of Admission to Columbia University, 1948

It was at Columbia where Cardenal encountered the work of poets such as Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman, T.S. Elliot, and others. The impact of these writers, in particular Pound, helped develop Cardenal's technique of exteriorism, which Cardenal defined as, "subjective poetry: narrative and anecdotal, made with the elements of real life and with concrete things, with proper names and precise details and exact dates and numbers and facts and sayings." His studies, along with the influence of family members such as his grandmother Agustina "Mimi" Urtecho, and uncle and fellow poet José Coronel Urtecho, helped Cardenal develop a strong poetic voice, which still resonates throughout Latin America and beyond.

In 1963, Cardenal along with Coronel Urtecho published an impactful anthology of their translations of North American poets titled *Antología de poesía norteamericana*. As seen in the selected letters found on this page, translation work involved frequent correspondence with the collaborating authors for explanation of some of the more nuanced language used by poets, like Lawrence Ferlinghetti.



Letter from Lawrence Ferlinghetti to Ernesto Cardenal, 1961.



Letter from Bob Lax to Ernesto Cardenal, undated.

From Kentucky to Solentiname

Cardenal returned to Nicaragua in 1950 and continued to write and express his opinions on Nicaraguan society under the Somoza dynasty. His discontent with this reality in Nicaragua led him to be a vocal opponent of the ruling regime. This political interest and fervor would only increase in the decades to follow. Cardenal experienced a religious transformation after participating in the unsuccessful 1954 April Revolution in Managua. His seminary studies brought him under the guidance of Trappist monk Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, who helped Cardenal grow as a spiritualist, activist, and poet. Cardenal continued seminary studies in Mexico and Colombia, all the while publishing seminal works such as *Hora 0*, *Epigramas*, and *Salmos*. Cardenal's ordination as a Catholic priest in 1965 proved to be a critical moment in his continued development as a religious leader and spiritualist. After discussions and guidance from Merton, Cardenal decided to return to Nicaragua and establish a spiritual community.



Video of Two Epigrams read by Ernesto Cardenal during the Simposio Internacional sobre la Obra Literaria del Poeta Ernesto Cardenal held in Granada, Nicaragua, May 19, 2005.

jhs



ABBAY OF GETHSEMANI
TRAPPIST KENTUCKY

To His Holiness Pope Paul VI.

Most Holy Father:

This letter will be presented to you by a delegation of faithful Catholics from Nicaragua in Central America. These faithful realize in a most urgent manner the great need of the contemplative and monastic life in Latin America today. After repeated unsuccessful attempts to obtain a foundation from the contemplative monasteries of the United States, especially the Abbey of Gethsemani, they are now beginning to form a contemplative community under the direction of Father Ernesto Cardenal, who was a novice at this monastery under my direction, and who, after leaving Gethsemani for reasons of health, has been ordained as a secular priest and is forming a small community to live a contemplative life and provide a place of retreat for the intellectuals of Nicaragua, for students, writers, and so on.

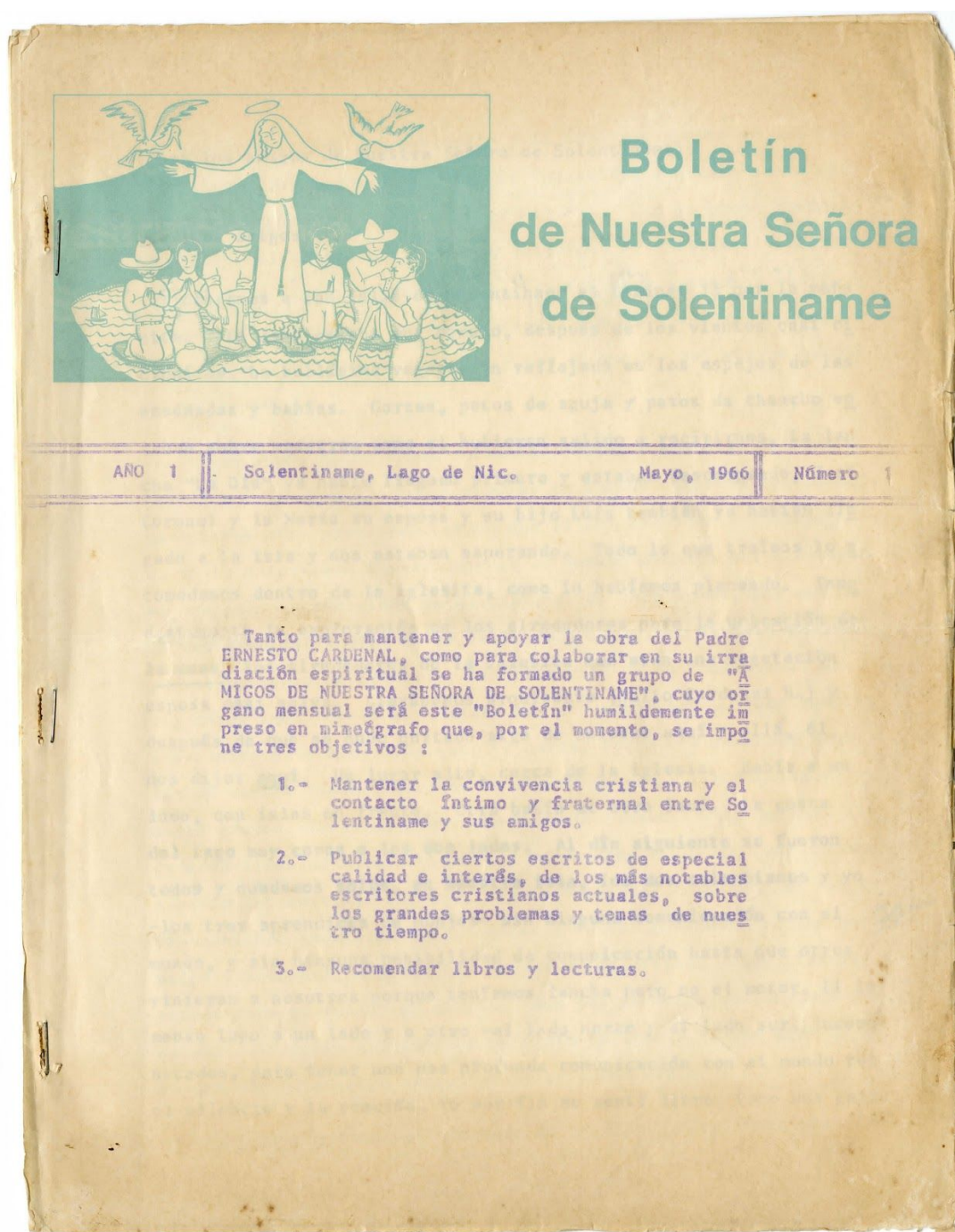
Since this project was, in part, conceived in conversations with me when Father Cardenal was a novice here, and since I am very interested in the project myself, they have asked me if I would consent to join the community and act as Spiritual Father, giving conferences and direction, and offering guidance that would help the community to understand correctly the Rule of St Benedict and monastic traditions. The community wishes to follow the Benedictine Rule. I gladly consent to offer this service provided that my Superiors see fit to permit me to be absent from my monastery and continue my monastic life (remaining canonically a member of my own Order) at this new community.

Because this is a very unusual project, and because of the difficulties that present themselves, these petitioners have found it necessary to come to Rome in order to ascertain, from Higher Superiors, whether this is not the will of God. It is hoped that Higher Superiors will interpret the will of God for all of us in this case. As the situation in Latin America today is so urgent, and as monasteries of the United States have been repeatedly urged to send men to Latin America, it is felt that the Abbey of Gethsemani, which has so far sent no one, could at least spare one priest in this very special case, in which the most prominent Catholic intellectuals of an entire nation have joined themselves together to make the petition.

It is felt by all of us that Your Holiness would be in a special position to see, in its full perspective, the meaning of this petition and of the project with which it is concerned. For that reason the matter is being submitted directly to Your Holiness at the same time as the Secretary of the S. Congregation of Religious is being consulted about it. Your Holiness' interest, support and blessing would indeed be most warmly appreciated. Begging the blessing of Your Holiness, I remain your most humbly devoted son in Christ Our Lord,

Thomas Merton.

In 1966, Cardenal chose the Solentiname Islands, an archipelago in the south of Lake Nicaragua, as the site for a semi-monastic community of artists and peasants. He received many visitors as well as letters of interest and support during his time at Solentiname. Cardenal and community members created the *Boletín de Nuestra Señora de Solentiname* as a way to share their experiences and reflections with those outside of their community. The manuscript "Mi isla de Solentiname" is a reflective piece written by Cardenal.



Boletín de Nuestra Señora de Solentiname, May 1966.



de Nuestra Señora de Solentiname

Año 12 | Solentiname, Lago de Nicaragua | Junio, 1967. | No. 4

Querido Poeta:

William se va mañana. Deja aquí naturalmente un inmenso vacío, pero es la voluntad de Dios, y bendito lo que Dios hace. Además, ya he visto, mi vocación es de soledad y pobreza espiritual (no sólo económica), pobreza total, también de efectos; y la unión con Dios es en esa soledad; un vacío para que lo llene Dios. No sólo la renuncia a las novias, o a la esposa o los hijos. También a veces la renuncia de los amigos la quiere Dios. Nada, como dice nuestro San Juan de la Cruz. Y bendita la nada que nos da el Todo. Otros vendrán tal vez después a traer más amistad y compañía y después se irán tal vez, dejando más soledad y vacío. Todo ello bendito, que se haga la voluntad de Dios. Y que sea todo lo que él quiera para nosotros.

Ernesto Cardenal

(PARA LOS AMIGOS DE NUESTRA SEÑORA DE SOLENTINAME)

Queridos amigos:

La breve carta anterior fue para el poeta Coronel Urtecho, vecino nuestro (su finca queda en este mismo rincón de Nicaragua) y él me ha pedido que la reprodujera en este Boletín, diciéndome que le había hecho bastante bien y se lo se-

MI ISLA DE SOLENTINAME

Al principio yo no tuve la idea de una fundación contemplativa en una isla, sino simplemente la idea de una fundación. [Mi entrega a Dios que me llevó a ingresar a la vida trapense en un monasterio de Estados Unidos me produjo una experiencia mística de carácter conyugal. Los dos años y medio de noviciado fueron como una luna de miel para mí. y como ya he dicho en otras ocasiones esos fueron los días más felices de mi vida. Fue un gran dolor para mí el que por razones de salud no pudiera seguir llevando la vida trapense. Mi director espiritual y Maestro de Novicios era el famoso monje contemplativo y escritor Thomas Nerton, y él me aconsejó que no tratara de ingresar en otra orden religiosa, sino que llevara una vida contemplativa independiente en mi propio país, Nicaragua, acompañado de algunas otras ~~personas~~ pocas personas, para no tener que hacerlo solo.

Yo amaba mucho el Gran Lago de Nicaragua en cuya ribera había nacido, y al tener que abandonar el monasterio de Estados Unidos, desde el principio pensé que nuestra pequeña fundación fuera en esa zona. Este lago es el segundo o tercer lago de agua dulce más grande del mundo, y en él el archipiélago de Solentiname está en un lugar remoto en el extremo sur del lago cerca de la frontera con Costa Rica, y no era conocido por nadie. Nadie fuera de sus habitantes llegaba a ese sitio. Pero un hermano mío que tenía un yate de pesca deportiva y hacía recorridos por el lago pasó una vez por Solentiname, y fue él el que me lo recomendó para mi fundación: por la belleza de esas islas, las tierras fértiles, el buen clima y el que tuviera habitantes. Y así fue que escogí una isla de Solentiname para mi fundación.

El lugar era tan alejado que la semana que yo llegué, una radio que tenía un programa en el que se daban premios a quien contestaba ciertas

También podría ser sospechosa la eficacia con que artículos de periodistas poco conocidos, a los que él recurre, se han difundido simultáneamente en los países de habla alemana.

¿Y esto por qué? No se puede negar que Solentiname ha sido una especie de símbolo, y en algunos casos ha sido como un mito, y lo ha sido en especial en Alemania y los países de habla alemana. En todo caso ha sido realmente, en cierta forma, un foco de irradiación de cristianismo y revolución.

Lo que yo estoy presumiendo podrá parecer descabellado. Pero aunque muchos creen que el principal oficio de la CIA es el espionaje, la verdad es que gasta sólo el 10% de su presupuesto en espionaje. El resto es empleado en conspiraciones, desestabilizaciones, chantajes, infiltración en organizaciones progresistas, difamaciones, y, aun asesinatos.

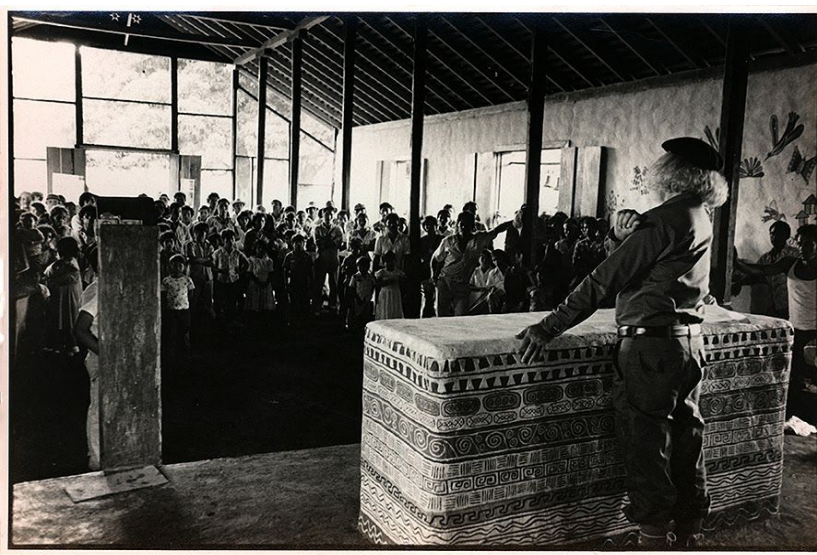
Quisiera creer que mi hipótesis no fuera cierta. Porque de ser cierta la campaña de difamación no se va a parar. Y lo que es peor, como me lo hacía ver con preocupación un amigo, la hostilidad podría en el futuro no sólo reducirse a los medios de comunicación sino pasar a algo más.

Ernesto Cardenal

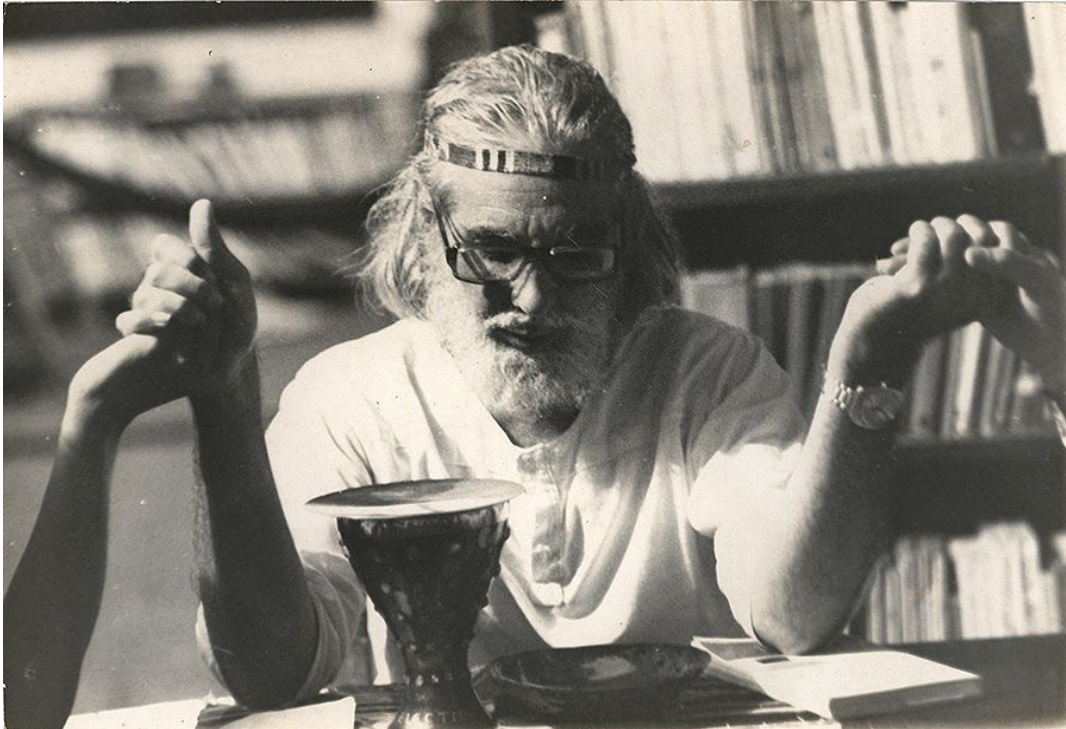
The images in this section illustrate the spiritual, artistic, and community-oriented nature of life in this unique place. Solentiname would be fertile ground for artistic and poetic exploration as well as Cardenal's development as a proponent of liberation theology. Cardenal's trip to post-revolutionary Cuba in 1970 would have great impact on his ideology and influenced his subsequent teachings and the atmosphere in Solentiname.



Ernesto Cardenal reading with two community members listening, undated.



Ernesto Cardenal speaking at Solentiname church, undated.



Ernesto Cardenal praying at a table, undated.



Ernesto Cardenal fishing on a boat, undated.

Euphoria to Disillusion

Ernesto Cardenal supported the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) revolutionary movement and its successful overthrow of the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979. The items in this section reflect Cardenal's involvement in the revolutionary efforts along with his time as Minister of Culture for the new Sandinista government.



Video of Ernesto Cardenal reading an excerpt from "Canto nacional" during a recital at the Simposio Internacional de la Obra Literaria del Poeta Cardenal, held in Granada, Nicaragua, May 19, 2005.



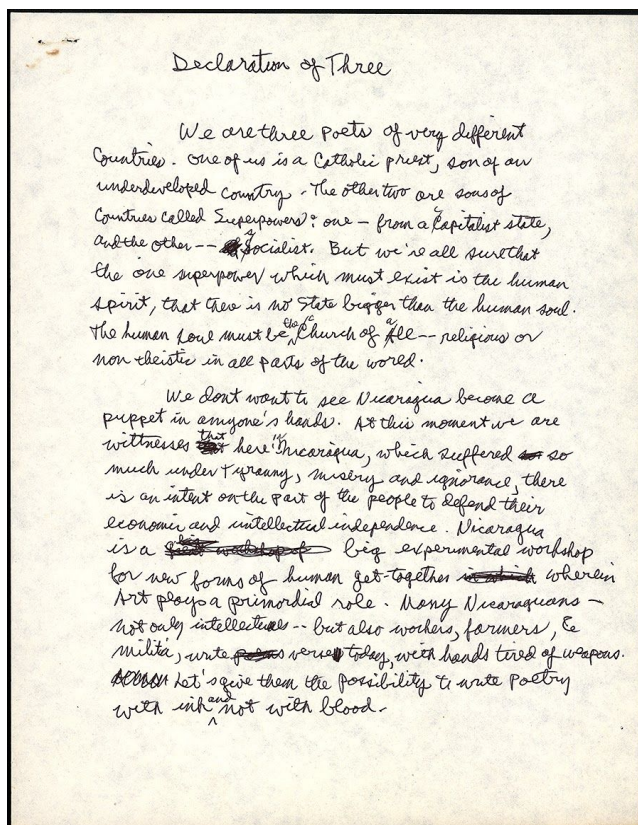
Members of the Junta of National Reconstruction walk the streets of León (provincial capital of Nicaragua), undated.



Ernesto Cardenal blessed the bodies of the Sandinistas who died today. In the photo all the members of the Junta of National Reconstruction, on the left. Tomás Borge, on the right Jaime Willoc [Wheelock] and Dora María. Also note Sergio Ramírez (León), undated.



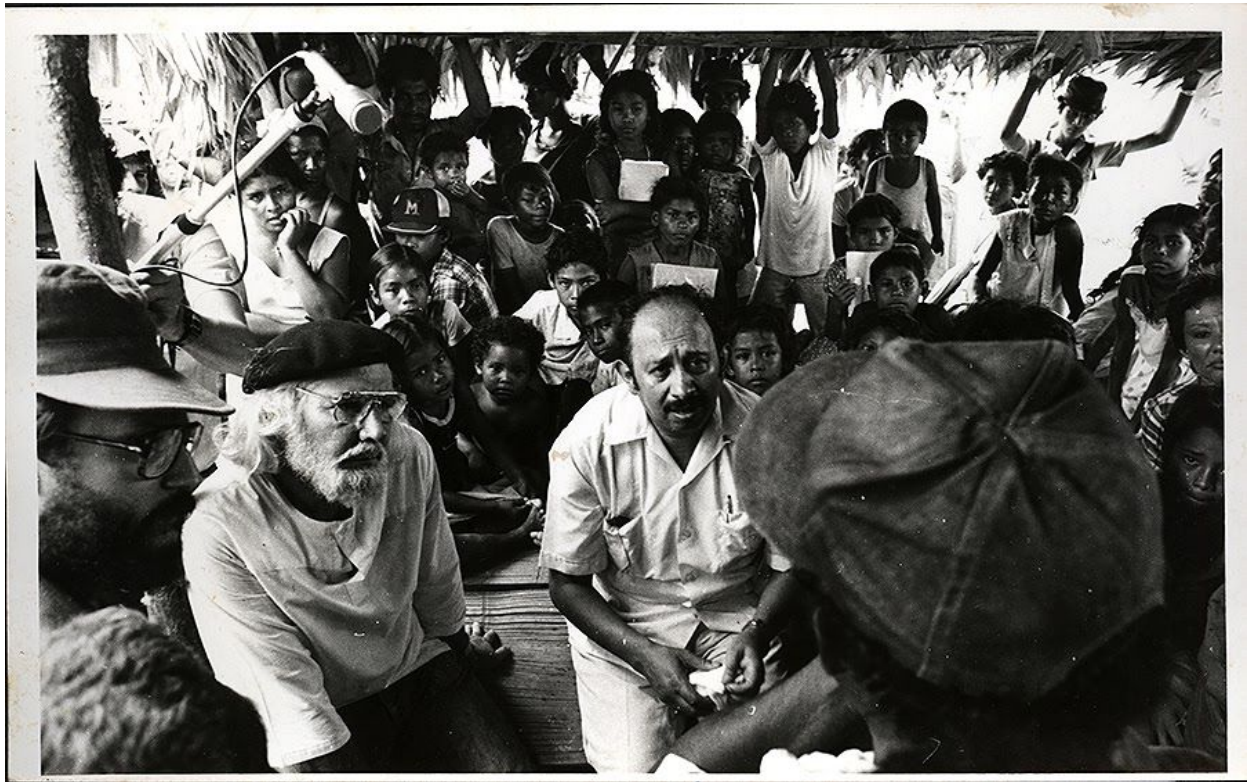
Ernesto Cardenal with Fidel Castro, undated.



Declaration of three, 1982.

The revolutionary movement in Nicaragua sparked a wave of international solidarity, especially among activists and writers. Cardenal's time as Minister of Culture (1979–1987) saw the creation of many impactful programs, including poetry workshops, cultural centers, and international book fairs.

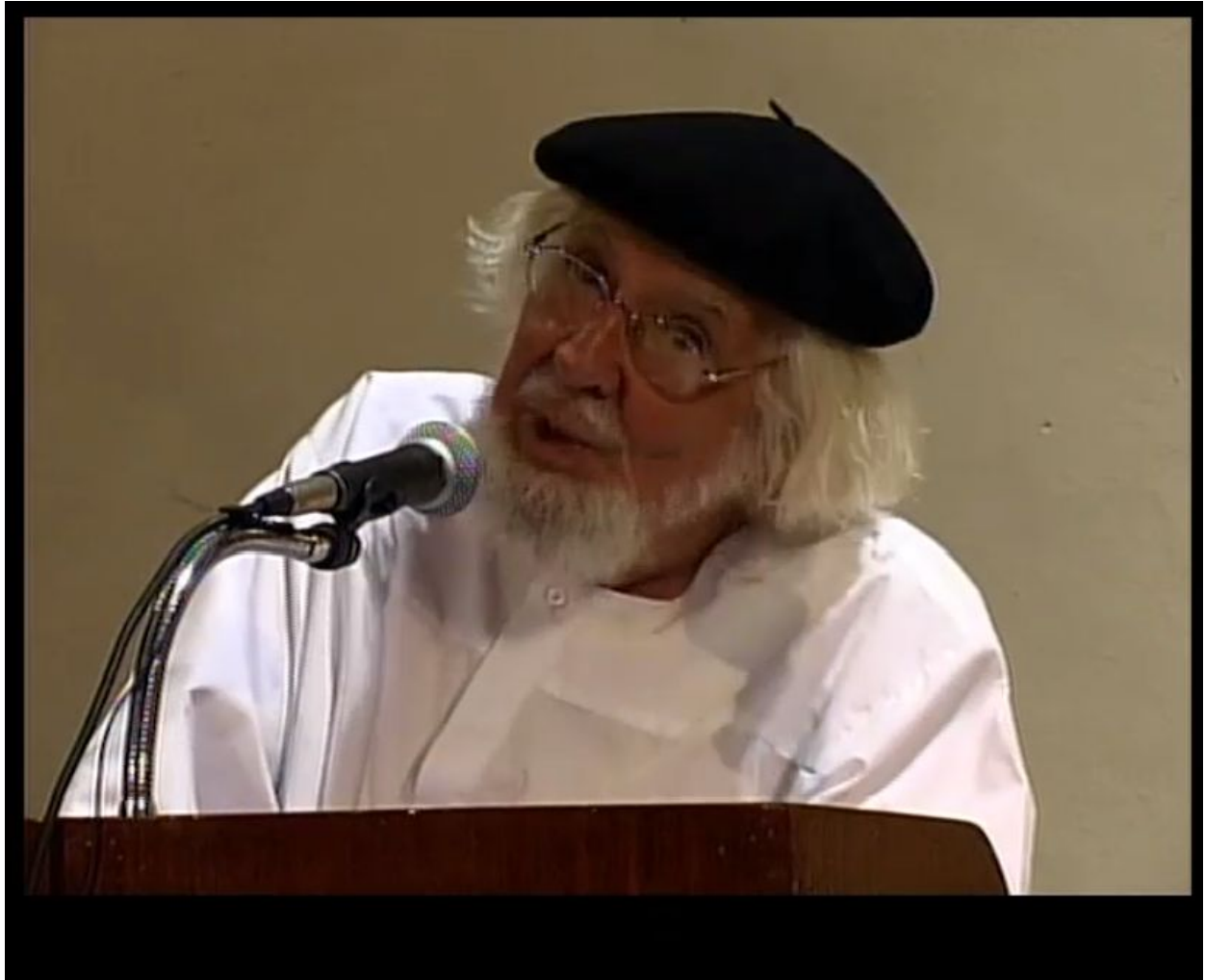
In 1994, Cardenal renounced the FSLN as he disagreed with the authoritarian direction in which the party was headed under Daniel Ortega.



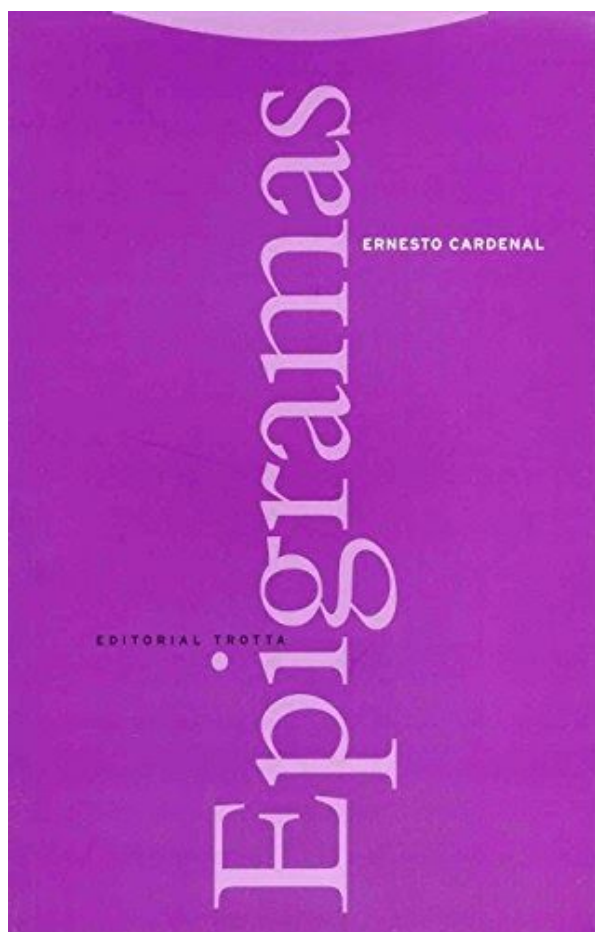
Ernesto Cardenal with group on Mosquito Coast, undated.

Impact and Legacy

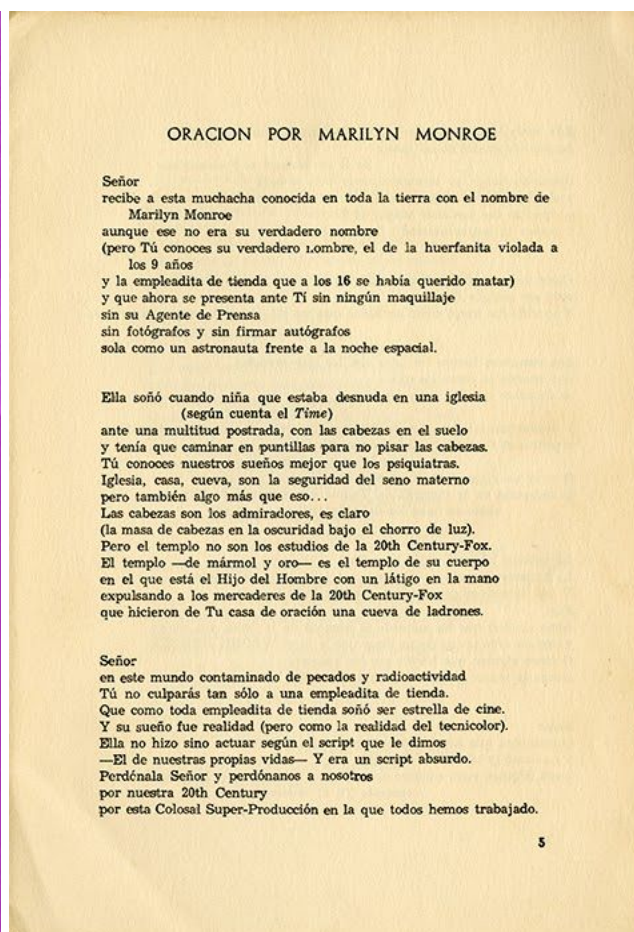
Ernesto Cardenal's published writings span 1957–2019. Some titles include *Hora 0* (1957), *Epigramas* (1961), *Salmos* (1964), *Oración por Marilyn Monroe y otros poemas* (1965), *El estrecho dudoso* (1966), *Oráculo sobre Managua* (1973), *El Evangelio en Solentiname* (1975), *Cántico cósmico* (1989), and *Versos del pluriverso* (2005).



Video of "Epitafio para Joaquín Pasos" read by Ernesto Cardenal during the Simposio Internacional sobre la Obra Literaria del Poeta Ernesto Cardenal held in Granada, Nicaragua, May 19, 2005.



Cover of Epigramas, undated.



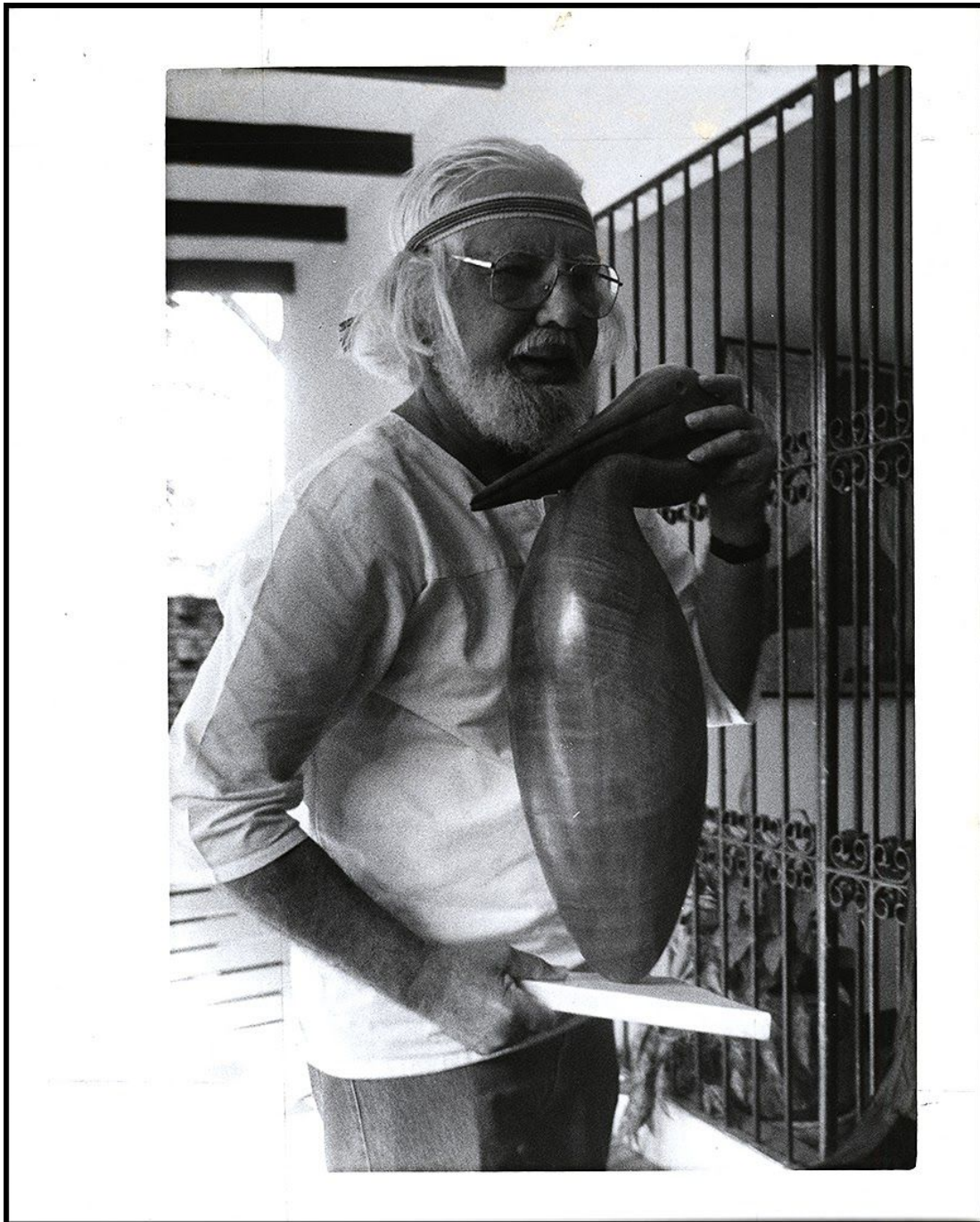
Opening page of "Oración por Marilyn Monroe," undated.

Ernesto Cardenal's renown as a poet, revolutionary, and activist led to many speaking engagements and invitations throughout the years. In celebration of the opening of the Ernesto Cardenal Papers in November 2016, Cardenal visited the Benson Latin American Collection for a celebration and a reading of his work.

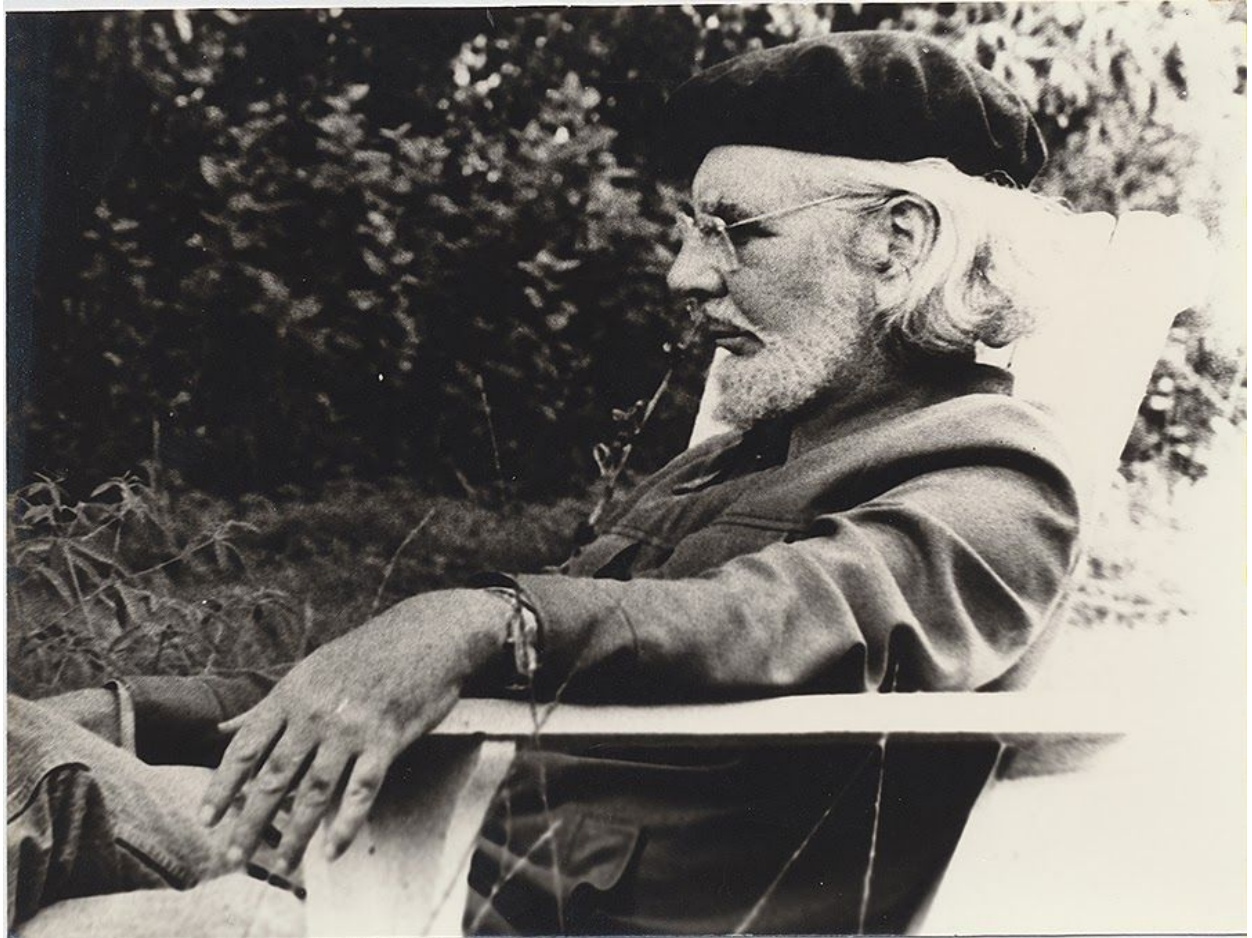


Ernesto Cardenal reading during event at Benson Latin American Collection, 2016.

Cardenal was also an accomplished sculptor and throughout the decades remained a vocal presence in Nicaraguan culture. He received many awards recognizing his work as a writer, including the Premio Iberoamericano de Poesía Pablo Neruda in 2009 and the Premio Reina Sofía de Poesía Iberoamericana in 2012. Cardenal's writings have been published in dozens of different languages, and his impact as a poet, liberation theologian, and activist continues to this day and will endure.



Ernesto Cardenal holding sculpture, undated.



Ernesto Cardenal lounging on chair, undated.